

Asbury Park Celebrates Pride with Disco Drag, Benefits LGBTQ+ Youth

By Sarah Bloom, Asbury Park Kiwanis Club
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Paying homage to an era of sequin attire and big hair, area drag queens showcased the best of the 70s raising awareness and funds for Project R.E.A.L benefiting area LGBTQ+ youth during Asbury Park Kiwanis Club's Studio 54 Drag Disco.

Six area queens performed to a sold-out crowd during the club's second annual event at Cross + Orange on June 17. Vanessa Sky, Tastie, Anita Sigg, Divinity Banks, Ms. 'nformation and Lady Celestina, the night's emcee, energized a crowd dressed for the occasion. Past Key Clubbers and current executive board members Renee Lehrman and Cori Lewin co-chaired the event.

Working in the nonprofit industry full time, Lewin utilized her professional experience and community ties in her efforts. And the months of planning prior to the Asbury Park mainstay event proved worthy for Lewin who couldn't have been happier with the result.

"This community is ready to support our work and our mission," the current president-elect and next year's club president said. "Everything from how attentive the team at Cross + Orange was to how excited people were to attend the event...If you can give people a great cause to support while also having a good time, they will show up. And next year's event will be bigger and better." Lewin confirmed a success with crowd participation.

"By the end of the night, most everyone was out of their seats dancing," she said, crediting the queens for their outlandish and entertaining performances and giving a nod to DJ Ted of Lionfire Entertainment. "None of this would be possible without the Drag Disco committee, Bob Fahey and the entire Cross + Orange team, Asbury Park Kiwanis members, and the support of the NJ District leadership including Gordon Meth and Martin Slezak."

Area queens gave it their all in their performances, igniting event-goers and enticing the crowd to dance and boogie to disco classics and new renditions. "They were booked solid all week," Lehrman said of the queens, who performed tirelessly during the nights leading to the event. "Despite [their] busy schedules, they showed up and showed out."

Organic connections over late-night drinks and a shared microphone opened up the relationships with the local drag queens. A regular at Georgie's – local staple for LGBTQ+ and allies alike, Lehrman opened the door for these partnerships. "Georgie's bar offers our talented LGBTQ+ community and locals, including myself, a platform to showcase their talents," she said. "The relationships formed over an impromptu duet on a Wednesday Karaoke night afforded me the opportunity to get to know these queens, in and out of drag."

And how fitting that Lehrman's handpicked selection of performers is closely tied with the show's benefactor. Project R.E.A.L's reach played a part in the event's locally-grown drag queens, coming full circle with how impactful the organization has been. The community support of the well-received event was the highlight for Lehrman.

"They purchased a ticket because they care about our mission and the message of love and acceptance which is THE mantra for Pride month," the co-chair said.

Project R.E.A.L is a prevention resource network that builds connections in local LGBTQ+ young adults ages 18-34, providing a drop-in center that offers social programming for marginalized populations. In addition to its monthly programming, Project R.E.A.L also provides access to resources such as HIV and STD testing and therapy for their clients.

"The annual benefit show that Kiwanis of Asbury Park organizes on behalf of Project R.E.A.L is one of our most anticipated events - and this year's Studio 54 Drag Disco was a high-energy success," Arthur Ayala, Community Outreach Health Educator at Project R.E.A.L, said.

"Here at Project R.E.A.L we're deeply humbled with the selfless efforts of Kiwanis of Asbury Park in helping us fundraise and raise awareness for the LGBTQIA+ community. "As a nonprofit these events are vital to our overall success because it allows us to accomplish many tasks such as keep our food pantry stocked for participants, create weekly events that are both entertaining and educational, and perform much needed renovations at our physical location."

The group's location is found at 805 4th Ave in Asbury Park.

"Everything you see at Project R.E.A.L has been donated by the local community so I cannot stress enough how important it is to have allies like Kiwanis of Asbury Park," Ayala said. "I want to thank each member of Kiwanis for their enthusiastic support, their fastidious event planning skills and for choosing us as partners!"